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# Encouraging the rise of fan publics: Bridging strategy to understand fan publics' positive communicative actions

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## 4 Encouraging the rise of fan publics

### Bridging strategy to understand fan publics' positive communicative actions

*Arunima Krishna and Soojin Kim*

The identification and engagement of supportive publics or fan publics to being a part of an organization's communication efforts and activities has very recently emerged as a key agenda among public relations scholars and practitioners. While discussions on fandom and fan activism can be found extensively in the social sciences (e.g., Lee, 2011; Parry, Jones & Wann, 2014; Millward & Poulton, 2014), public relations as a field is yet to address fans as a public of interest. A few efforts have been made to build the connections between relationship management research (e.g., Bruning, Dials, & Shirka, 2008), public relations, and fandom (e.g. L'Etang, 2006; Dimitrov, 2008), yet these efforts remain few and far between. This edited volume presents a positive step in rectifying this issue, recognizing what L'Etang pointed out:

To date sports literature does not seem to appreciate that public relations defines and analyses key stakeholders and newly emergent publics and interest groups with a view to understanding not only their perceptions of, and relationships with, the organisations but also with each other.

(2006, p. 245)

While L'Etang (2006) focused specifically on sports fans, the logic extends to other types of organizations and their publics too. In this chapter we attempt to understand fan publics related to universities, and present research on university-student relationships.

The advent of social media and digital media has allowed various publics to engage in word-of-mouth behaviors about organizations and brands that they have strong feelings for, and for public relations practitioners to monitor and attend to such behaviors (Krishna & Kim, 2015). Fan publics of an organization may actively engage in supportive behaviors for an organization including positive communicative behaviors. Given the nature of social and digital media, such messages have the potential to reach a large number of people in a short space of time, and therefore may have consequences on the decision or behaviors of the organization (Kim & Rhee, 2011; Bach & Kim, 2012) and vice versa (Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002).

The focus of this chapter is on individuals who have strong positive relationships with an organization, or fan publics. Specifically in this chapter we examine the university–student dynamic, investigating how a university may encourage the development of fan publics in its student body through its communicative actions. In a university setting, students who perceive a high quality university–student relationship should be considered fan publics who can positively support, and pose strategic opportunities for the university. Their positive word-of-mouth behaviors may influence prospective students, community residents, investors, media, and other important stakeholders of the university. In contrast, students could also be hostile publics who can pose a threat for the university by engaging in negative word-of-mouth behaviors about the university if they are not satisfied with the university and if they find its behaviors and decisions to be problematic.

Interestingly, few public relations scholars have addressed university–student relationships as being an important area of inquiry. Students are a key internal public for a university as they not only interact with it on a regular basis, their affiliation with the university has the potential to last a lifetime in the form of alumni giving (Hueston, 1992), and university identification (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Yet few studies of public relations have examined current students as publics who display communicative behaviors and may engage in alumni giving in the future (Sung & Yang, 2009). In this study we focus on students who perceive high quality relationships with the university, fan publics, to understand the factors that contribute to their development as well as communicative outcomes enjoyed by universities due to fan publics.

We investigate the relationship between a university's public relations strategy and student publics' communicative actions about their university. We aim to (a) conceptualize fan publics as publics who have positive relationships with the organization; (b) propose the bridging strategy as a proactive public engagement strategy that promotes mutually beneficial relationships between the organization and publics which helps create fan publics; and (c) test relationships between the bridging strategy and its multiple outcomes. In testing those relationships we look at how an organization's public relations strategy influences the quality and type of organization–public relationships that create fan and hostile publics' communication behavior.

## **Literature review**

### ***Conceptualization of fan publics***

People talk about organizations, products, and brands. Corporate communicators and marketers have begun to acknowledge the significant change in consumer empowerment (Kucuk, 2008; Shaw & Duff, 2002; Harrison, 2005) – which means that active consumers proactively seek to engage in and to influence products and services through their actions (Shaw, Newholm, &

Dickinson, 2006). With the power of social media and networks, consumers have the power to voice their opinions about an organization (Kucuk, 2008).

However, people show different levels of activeness in their communication behavior. Specifically, hardcore groups of people, or extreme publics, exhibit high levels of either supportive or hostile behavior about an organization, which may either be a strategic opportunity or threat to the organization. According to Lee et al. (2014), extreme publics are more likely to express their opinions about a problem or an issue than others, regardless of their minority position. Their findings indicate that hardcore groups of people freely engage in active communication behavior without fear of backlash from the mainstream and that there is a possibility of this group being the majority.

While it is important to focus on activeness levels in publics' communicative actions, of more interest to marketers and communicators is the valence and quality of those behaviors. Kim and Rhee's (2011) conceptualization of megaphoning and its antecedents is of value here. In their study, Kim and Rhee found that employees who perceive high-quality organization–public relationships actively spread positive messages about their employers to external publics. A logical extension of their argument, then, may find validity in conceptualizing fan publics. Extending Kim and Rhee's (2011) discussion of megaphoning, in this study we seek to understand student fan publics as those who (a) perceive high organization–public relationships and (b) engage in positive communicative behaviors about the university. Fan publics are conceptualized as publics who evaluate their relationship with an organization positively and support the organization by engaging in positive word-of-mouth behavior.

Still lacking in current research is an understanding of the motivations behind these empowered publics' communication behaviors, and the factors that encourage or discourage these behaviors. Hostile and antagonist consumer behaviors and their impact on organizational performance have received scholarly attention (e.g., Bach & Kim, 2012; Blodgett, Granbois, & Walters, 1993; Day & Landon, 1976; Richins, 1983; Singh, 1988, 1990a, 1990b). However, little research has attempted to explain the conditions under which the rise of such antagonistic publics may be preempted through organizational actions, and fan publics may be encouraged. A central question for public relations research, and the guiding question for this study, then, is *how an organization can create fan publics*. Every organization wants to increase positive reactions from target publics and to build a group of supportive fans, while decreasing hostile reactions from consumers and activist groups. In the next section we outline how public relations strategy may be used to answer this question.

### **Bridging strategy to create fan publics**

In the previous section we discussed the creation of fan publics as being a central theme for public relations scholarship. In this section we explore one way in which organizations can encourage fan publics to emerge, that is, through their own behaviors and communication strategy.

The term public relations strategy is still an ambiguous one among scholars and practitioners alike (Steyn, 2007; Tibble, 1997). Extant literature on public relations strategy focuses on messaging strategy (e.g. Werder, 2006) and relationship cultivation strategy (e.g., Ki & Hon, 2008, 2009). The focus of both public engagement and relationship cultivation strategies remains to be on favorable, long-term relationships between the organization and publics. In fact, previous work on student loyalty to their universities revealed that students who evaluate their relationship with the university positively were more likely to stay at the university rather than drop out (Bruning & Ralston, 2001). Understanding which kinds of public relations strategies may help encourage positive university–student relationships then becomes an important context for study.

This study draws upon Kim's (2014, 2015) work on public relations strategy, specifically, on her adaptation of Grunig's (2009) paradigms of public relations, bridging, and buffering, as public relations strategies. Bridging refers to a public relations strategy by which an organization makes or revises its behaviours or policies to be compatible to the needs of its strategic publics and makes efforts to narrow gaps between the stances of the organization and its publics. Buffering is conceptualized as a public relations strategy by which an organization seeks to shape and control publics' perceptions of itself, without actually rectifying any problem-causing behaviors (Kim, 2014, 2015).

In this chapter, the bridging strategy is proposed as a public relations strategy that may help create fan publics, and the attendant supportive communication behavior towards the organization. An organization that employs the bridging strategy addresses and adjusts the differences in interests between publics and the organization and takes responsibility for its actions. In addition, bridging strategies include an organization's strategic communication of these proactive problem solving approaches. By doing and communicating its efforts to listen and reflect publics' voices into the decision making process, the organization is able to have favorable relational outcomes: it encourages the creation of fan publics who not only are committed to the relationship with the organization but also exhibit strong supportive behavior towards the organization.

### **Relational outcomes of bridging strategy: type and quality of organization–public relationship**

Stoker and Tusinski (2006) say that the goal of communication should be to achieve authenticity. Shen and Kim (2012) applied the concept of authenticity on organizational behavior which has been used for leadership. Authenticity can be achieved by meeting multiple dimensions including truthfulness, transparency, and consistency. When an organization uses two-way symmetrical communication it is likely to be perceived as being authentic, which will promote a favorable organization–public relationship (Shen & Kim, 2012).

Since an essential element of the bridging strategy is the use of dialogue to bridge the gap between the management and publics, a logical extension of Shen and Kim's (2012) study would be that the use of a bridging strategy will

be positively associated with perceived authenticity. An organization adopting a bridging strategy is likely to be consistent and transparent in its words and actions so that they will be perceived as genuine in the publics' eyes. As a result publics are likely to favorably evaluate their relationships with the organization and to engage in supportive behavior for the organization. Hence, the following hypotheses are posited:

- H1: Perceived use of bridging strategy is positively associated with perceived authenticity.
- H2: Perceived authenticity will be positively associated with quality of organization–public relationship.
- H3: Publics who perceive good quality relationship with the organization (fan publics) are likely to engage in positive word-of-mouth behavior about the organization.
- H3–1: Publics who perceive poor quality relationship with the organization are likely to engage in negative word-of-mouth behavior about the organization.

The use of a bridging strategy and organization–public relationship should also be discussed in the context of type of relationship that publics have with the organization. Type of relationship will be one of outcomes from the adoption of the bridging strategy and affect publics' communication behavior. According to Hon and Grunig (1999), there are two types of relationships: communal and exchange relationships. In a communal relationship entities provide benefits for one another out of care for the other, while those in an exchange relationship do so out of expected reciprocity.

Waters (2008) found that repeated donors are more likely to perceive their relationship with the organization as a communal relationship while one-time donors are more likely to perceive theirs as an exchange relationship. To encourage supportive publics, or fan publics, like repeated donors, it is necessary for an organization to utilize a proper public relations strategy to engage those key publics. If an organization fails to communicate well with its key publics, students in this case who are likely to be future donors, it is likely to have exchange relationships with them and it will be difficult to have a high quality organization–public relationship with them. Hung-Baesecke and Chen (2013) suggest that the type of relationship affects the quality of the organization–public relationship and that a communal relationship contributes to relational trust while an exchange relationship does not contribute to enhancing a quality organization–public relationship.

Based on the above discussion, it would be reasonable to expect that those in exchange relationships with the organization will evaluate their relationships with the organization negatively, and engage in negative behaviors about it, as they believe that their relationships exist only when they are needed by the organization. In contrast, people in communal relationships with the organization will evaluate their relationship with the organization favorably and engage

in positive behavior for the organization. Therefore, the type of organization–public relationship will be an immediate outcome of the perceived use of the bridging strategy, which will affect the quality of the organization–public relationship and communication behavior. Therefore the following hypotheses are posited:

- H4: Perceived use of a bridging strategy is positively associated with a communal relationship.
- H4–1: Perceived use of a bridging strategy is negatively associated with an exchange relationship
- H4–2: Publics who evaluate their relationships with the organization as communal relationships are likely to evaluate their relationship with the organization positively.
- H4–3: Publics who evaluate their relationships with the organization as exchange relationships are likely to evaluate their relationship with the organization negatively.

## **Method**

### ***Data collection***

An online survey was conducted at a large Midwestern university (September–December 2013). The survey used Qualtrics software and participants were recruited through the university’s research system in exchange for course credit. A total of 684 university students responded with 611 valid responses to 110 questions. Among the respondents, 256 students were male (41.9%) while 355 students were female (58.1%). A large majority of the students, 548 respondents (89.7%), were domestic students and 63 students (10.3%) were international students.

### ***Measures***

To measure perceptions of the use of a bridging strategy, Kim’s (2014) scales were used (total 7 items) (Cronbach’s  $\alpha=.847$ ). The OPRA scale as revised and updated by Shen and Kim (2012): trust (9 items), commitment (6 items), control mutuality (4 items), and satisfaction (4 items) was utilized to measure organization–public relationships. Cronbach’s alpha values were respectively: trust=.853, control mutuality=.667, commitment=.624, and satisfaction=.918. Exchange and communal relationships were measured using Hon and Grung’s (1999) items (4 items). Based on Kim and Rhee’s (2011) work, 7 items for positive megaphoning and negative megaphoning behaviors respectively were adopted (Cronbach’s alpha for positive megaphoning=.887; for negative megaphoning=.904). (Table 4.1).

Table 4.1. Reliability values

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Cronbach's alpha</i>	<i>Number of items</i>
Authenticity	.853	4
Bridging	.847	7
Trust	.853	9
Satisfaction	.918	4
Control mutuality	.667	4
Commitment	.624	4
Communal relationship	.582	3
Exchange relationship	.775	4
Positive communicative behavior	.887	7
Negative communicative behavior	.904	7

### **Data analysis**

To conduct a data analysis and test the complex relationships between multiple variables, SEM (Structural Equation Modeling) was used. SEM also allows researchers to correct for the distorting influences of measurement errors. In addition, it is a good method to measure mediating relationships. Maximum likelihood (ML) procedures were selected for data analysis with AMOS. These techniques allow researchers to have consistent parameter estimates even when assumptions of normality might be violated (Yuan & Bentler, 2007, p. 17). Missing data was treated using Expected Maximization (EM) imputation.

## **Results**

### **Structural model analysis and hypothesis testing**

To evaluate the structural equation model, the following model fit indices were used:  $CFII \geq .90$  (moderate fit),  $CFII \geq .95$  (good fit),  $.08 \leq RMSEA \leq .10$  (moderate fit),  $RMSEA \leq .08$  (good fit) (MacCallum et al., 1996),  $0 \leq SRMR \leq 1.0$  (moderate fit),  $SRMR \leq .08$  (acceptable) (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and  $NFI \geq .90$  (good fit) (McDonald & Ho, 2002). The proposed models were tested as initially specified and then modifications using error covariance were made. The first structural model to test dynamics between bridging strategy, the effect of communal relationship, organization–public relationship, and positive megaphoning behavior demonstrated a good data–model fit ( $CFI = .906$   $SRMR = .079$   $RMSEA = .058$   $\text{Chi-square}[\text{df}] = 2160.835[708]$   $p = .000$ ) (Figure 4.1). The second structural model to test relationships between bridging strategy, authenticity, the effect of exchange relationship, organization–public relationship and negative megaphoning behavior yielded a good data–model fit ( $CFI = .919$   $SRMR = .078$   $RMSEA = .053$   $\text{Chi-square}[\text{df}] = 2166.835[708]$   $p = .000$ ) (Figure 4.2).



The first hypothesis posited that when publics perceive an organization adopting high level of bridging strategy they will perceive the organization's behaviour as authentic. The standardized path coefficient was positive and significant (path=.710\*\*\*  $p<.001$ ). Therefore **H1** was supported (Figure 4.1). Next, it was predicted that perceived authentic organizational behavior will mediate the relationships between bridging strategy and quality of organization–public relationship. The standardized path coefficient between perceived authentic organization behaviour and quality of organization–public relationship was positive and significant (path=.774\*\*\*  $p<.001$ ), providing strong support for **H2** (Figure 4.1).

We then proposed that perceived quality of organization–public relationship will have a positive effect on positive megaphoning (**H3**) (Figure 4.1) and a negative effect on negative megaphoning (**H3–1**) (Figure 4.2). These hypotheses on publics' communication behaviors were also supported (**H3**: path=.737\*\*\*  $p<.001$ ) (Figure 4.1) (**H3–1**: path=-.456\*\*\*  $p<.001$ ) (Figure 4.2). In terms of the nature of the relationship, first we hypothesized that there will be a positive relationship between bridging strategy and communal relationships (**H4**) (Figure 4.1) and a negative relationship between bridging strategy and exchange relationship (**H4–1**) (Figure 4.2). Next, we predicted that when publics perceive their relationships with the organization as communal they are likely to evaluate their relationship with the organization positively (Figure 4.1) (**H4–2**), while those in an exchange relationship are likely to evaluate it negatively (**H4–3**; Figure 4.2). All hypotheses were also strongly supported (**H4**: path=.529\*\*\*, **H4–1**: path=-.130\*\*  $p<.01$ , **H4–2**: path=.204  $p<.001$ , **H4–3**: path=-.086\*\*  $p<.01$ ).

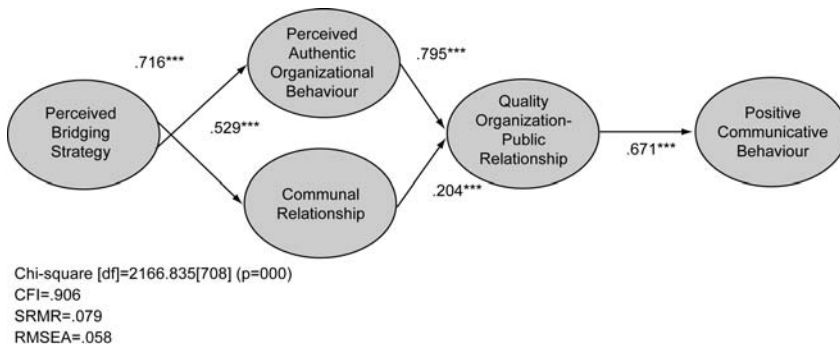


Figure 4.1 Model for associations between fan publics' positive communication behavior, and perceived use of bridging strategy, authenticity and relationship type and quality.

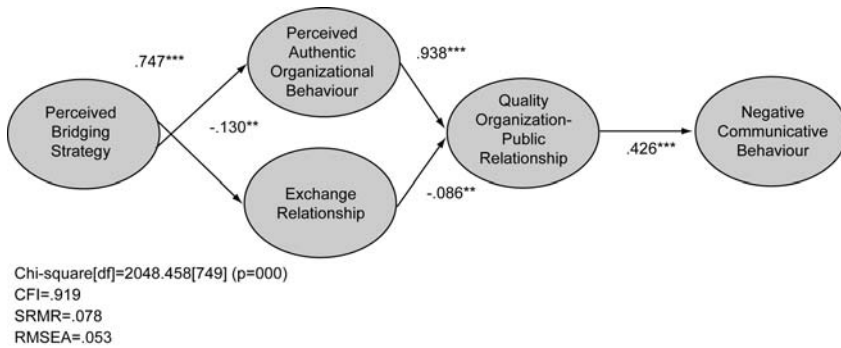


Figure 4.2 Model for associations between fan publics' negative communication behavior, and perceived use of bridging strategy, authenticity and relationship type and quality.

## Discussion

In this study we sought to understand how organizations can use public relations strategies to promote the rise of fan publics. By specifically looking at university–student relationships in this regard, we sought to propose a new conceptualization for fan publics, as those who perceive high quality organization–public relationships and engage in positive communication behaviors about the organization. Our findings show that by adopting a bridging strategy, that is, a public relations strategy where the organization attempts to integrate the publics' perspectives and needs in its decision making and functioning, organizations can encourage their publics to engage in supportive behaviors, thereby creating fan publics.

The results of this research have several important implications for the theory and practice of public relations. First, this study represents one of the few scholarly efforts to understand university–student public relationships from the perspective of public relations. As Bruning and Ralston (2001) pointed out, public relations should attempt to understand students' intentions and behaviors towards their universities. Accordingly, the results of this study help bring university–student relationships into conversation with public relations theory, and propose a theory of students' relationships and communicative behaviors.

Second, this study furthers how public relations scholarship understands fan publics. By proposing a new conceptualization of fan publics as supportive publics who perceive high quality relationships and engage in positive communicative behaviors about the organization, this study helps situate the idea of fandom within public relations literature. For years public relations scholars have advocated that cultivation of strong positive organization–public relationships help increase publics' loyalty towards the organization (Bruning & Ralston, 2001). This study extends scholars' thought from just loyalty to fandom, explicating the behavioural outcomes that emerge from fan publics' loyalty.

Third, the results of this study further the arguments for universities to have dedicated public relations activities and for them to adopt theoretical principles for more effective functioning. That public relations has been relegated to primarily managing reputation rather than cultivating relationships, has been established in public relations scholarship (Bruning & Ralston, 2001). The results of this study offer evidence-based arguments for universities to employ public relations strategies to encourage and cultivate positive university–student relationships, and promote the emergence of fan publics among their student body. These fan publics, then, may help promote the university to external publics by engaging in positive communication behaviors about it, as was seen in this study.

Finally, the results of this study will also help practitioners understand fan publics better, and provide mechanisms for them through which they may encourage the rise of fan publics. As seen in this study, adoption of the bridging strategy is an effective tool to cultivate and encourage the emergence of fan publics, and discourage hostility from non-fan publics.

However, there are a few limitations associated with this study. Since it was conducted in a university setting the results from this study may not be generalizable to other industries or types of organizations. We also acknowledge that the bridging strategy is not a one-cure-fits-all for all public relations problems. It is important to note, however, that the bridging strategy does not discount the importance of strategic messaging. The main assertion of the bridging strategy is simply that strategic messaging can be most effective when backed by organizational behavior.

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